

Food Is Safer than It Has Ever Been

Robert Paarlberg

“America’s food supply is far safer today than it was in the past.”

In the following viewpoint Robert Paarlberg argues that food in the United States is very safe and much safer than it was in the past. He contends that it may seem otherwise because of the media attention given to stories about food-borne illness. Paarlberg claims that most instances of food-borne illness are the result of improper handling, not due to the contamination of foods bought at the supermarket. Paarlberg explains how food safety is regulated in the United States and how food safety has become a political issue, which he claims is partially related to an increase in imported food. Paarlberg is the Betty Freyhof Johnson Class of 1944 Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College and an associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. He is the author of *Food Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know* and *Starved for Science: How Biotechnology Is Being Kept Out of Africa*.

Robert Paarlberg, “Food Safety and Genetically Engineered Foods,” in *Food Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 155–159. By permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

AS YOU READ, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. Paarlberg claims that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that food-borne diseases cause how many deaths each year in the United States?
2. At what year does the author claim that aggregate food safety in the United States hit a plateau?
3. What two government agencies are responsible for US food safety, according to the author?

Food in the United States is generally safe and significantly safer than in the past, but the demand for safety has increased as society has become more affluent, creating a parallel demand for improved food safety policy. Food safety lapses are favorite stories in the popular media, and food companies and food retailers can pay a heavy price if the lapse is traced back to them.

Food-Borne Illness

More than 200 known diseases can be transmitted through food, caused primarily by viruses, bacteria, parasites, toxins, metals, or prions (as in the case of mad cow disease). The symptoms can range from mild gastroenteritis to life-threatening neurologic, hepatic, and renal syndromes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, food-borne diseases cause approximately 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths in the United States each year. Three pathogens, *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, and *Toxoplasma*, are responsible for approximately 30 percent of the deaths. Children under the age of 4 are sickened by food more than any other age group, but adults over the age of 50 suffer more hospitalizations and deaths.

The changing frequency of food-borne illness in any large population is difficult to monitor and measure. Mild cases often go unreported, so official frequency counts are heavily altered by the intensity of surveillance. Nationally since 1996, the CDC has attempted to track food-borne sickness through regular surveys of more than 650 clinical laboratories around the country that serve about 46 million people in 10 different states. At the state level, however, surveillance